

A23

NEW YORK TIMES
17 January 1985

ESSAY | William Safire

The 109th Element

WASHINGTON

"I am indignant," huffed William Casey. The focus of the Director of Central Intelligence's indignation was my characterization of his relationship with James Baker, the White House chief of staff, in a recent New York Times Magazine article.

The two men "don't speak," I wrote. Not so, said America's spy-master; that phrase was inaccurate and should be retracted forthwith.

Hold on: during "Briefinggate," both men submitted flatly contradictory sworn statements to Congress; if one told the truth, the other lied. Later on, Bill Casey received the clear impression that Jim Baker wanted his C.I.A. job. Did this not suggest that their relationship was other than sweetness and light?

"I have a grievance," Mr. Casey admitted, changing that to "I had a grievance. But I deal with Baker. I don't go around sulking. I was angry about it, but I don't let it interfere with my work."

Of course, "don't speak" is a metaphor for estrangement, like "at swords' points" or "at loggerheads." The phrase is what Judge Robert Bork, in his classic concurring opinion affirming the dismissal of the libel case against the columnists Evans and Novak, called "rhetorical hyperbole." Apparently Mr. Casey wants to be certain nobody takes "don't speak" literally, and urges a confirming call to Mr. Baker; if I ever get the hang of my new phone, I could probably set up a conference call and listen to the two men speak to each other with elaborate civility.

That would prove that their relationship was at least coolly "correct," not like that of the ever-departing Michael Deaver and William Clark, who have often been reported to detest each other so vigorously that they really do not speak. (That embittered Deaver-Clark rivalry suggests why neither man was President Reagan's choice for chief of staff to replace the lemme-outa-

here Mr. Baker, who was recently offered a way over the fence by Regan-at-the-Switch. At Spooksville, that switch took Mr. Baker's hot breath off the neck of Mr. Casey, who evidently now feels the need to appear on at least businesslike speaking terms with his former archfoe. All clear?)

The point of today's in-depth "retraction" is to demonstrate that all the conquests, glories and spoils of high office are often shrunk to the enmities, rivalries and irritations we all know in our offices and families.

For example, my relationship with Bill Casey used to be that of old pal

and colleague; I handled his only run for Congressional office 20 years ago, taking him to a speech teacher to overcome his terminal mumbles. Now we sometimes get on each other's nerves; when he testily suggested in his recent call that I belonged in a different line of work, I recalled his recent crude attempt at press intimidation of ABC through the Federal Communications Commission, and I lit into him in a way that may raise eyebrows when they play the tape back at Langley. (The C.I.A. denies routinely recording calls; I don't believe it.)

Does this mutual testiness mean I've blown a source? Could be, although he came over at the Hoover Institute bash the other night and said "What's got you all hot and bothered?" Columnists have feelings, too (sniffle).

More important, does an inclination to settle scores, as well as a personal chemistry among people in power, affect in great degree the way governments work?

Yes, even though it's hard to document. In Israel, no love is lost between Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, who work together in the Labor Alignment; less is lost between Yitzhak Shamir and Ariel Sharon in the opposition Likud. In the Kremlin, blood feuds rage among the party, K.G.B. and army factions — as well as within each faction, as the Gorba-

chev-Ogarkov split demonstrates. Surely these are not impersonal "policy disputes."

At home, the clashes between Donald Regan and Richard Darman; between George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger as expressed by their designated proxies, Richard Burt and Richard Perle; between Paul Nitze and Edward Rowny — are not merely outgrowths of differences in approach or conflicting ambitions, but are affected by the element beyond the 92 found in nature and 16 made by man: personal chemistry's human element.

Dislike is always denied — "of course we speak" — but is a vital element in all organizations, including the President's official family. When examining the latest table of organization, listen for the bubbling of human juices. □